

The Significance and Legacy of Earth Day

Article: Adam Rome's "The Genius of Earth Day"

Class Discussion/Analytical Questions

- 1) Rome explains that the first Earth Day was the biggest event of the 1960s, bigger than the civil rights march, the antiwar demonstrations, and woman's liberation protests. Do you agree? Why or why not? How was the original Earth Day so much more than a one day event?
- 2) Despite Earth Day's importance, school texts neglect the events sparking the environmental movement. Why do you think this is?
- 3) Senator Gaylord Nelson understood the importance of engaging students with environmental ideals via teach-ins. What ways, other than improving school texts, can Earth Day, and by extension the environmental movement, be enhanced in schools? In American society? In the world? Should it be? Why or why not?
- 4) Bureaucrats and politicians ensured the original Earth Day was a success. How did their efforts help make Earth Day into such a powerful catalyst?
- 5) Rome claims that the original Earth Day was a profound source of inspiration for those involved. Many historians cite this event as the beginning of the modern environmental movement. How have Earth Day celebrations continued to motivate individuals? In what ways have past Earth Day celebrations failed to motivate individuals? What efforts should be taken to regain the original Earth Day's inspiration in order to continue to effect positive environmental change?

Activities

1. Environmental Visions

Politicians, teachers, students, and environmental activists have utilized Earth Day to express their environmental visions. Rome describes those of three individuals involved in the original Earth Day: Senator Gaylord Nelson, law student Denis Hayes, and environmental activist Marshall Brewer.

- 1) Break the class into three groups, assigning them Nelson, Hayes, or Brewer. Ask each group to list things that describe the environmental visions of their individual.
- 2) Then have the groups briefly describe and analyze their individual's environmental vision.
- 3) After the class has a general understanding of these three environmental visions, ask the groups to create collective environmental visions.
- 4) Have groups present and defend their environmental visions in order to create an environmental vision for the class. This can also be done for the university, the community, the nation, and even the world.

2. The Legacy of Earth Day

Primary Sources:

- **Richard Nixon’s “Letter to Governors Urging Citizen Participation in Environmental Programs During Earth Week”**
- **Barack Obama’s “Remarks on the 40th Anniversary of Earth Day”**

Break the class into small groups and ask each group to read and discuss Nixon’s “Letter to...Earth Week” in order to understand the overall significance of the primary source.

Questions to Prompt Active Engagement:

- 1) What motivated President Nixon to write this letter?
- 2) What does Nixon proclaim in this document?
- 3) What impacts, both direct and indirect, follow Nixon’s declaration?
- 4) What is the overall significance of this primary source?

After the groups have discussed Nixon’s “Letter to...Earth Week,” have the groups read and discuss Obama’s “Remarks on...Earth Day.”

Questions to Prompt Active Engagement:

- 1) What motivated President Obama to give this speech?
- 2) How does Obama view the past 40 years in regards to American environmentalism?
- 3) According to Obama, what environmental hurdles remain?
- 4) What is the overall significance of this primary source?

After the groups have discussed Obama’s “Remarks on...Earth Day,” have the groups assess the past forty years of American environmentalism. While Nixon and Obama explain that much needs to be done in order to improve the environment, a lot has been accomplished in the past forty years. Each group should write a short speech or letter explaining the strengths (environmental hurdles overcome) and weaknesses (environmental hurdles yet to conquer) of the environmental movement in America.